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ABSTRACT

An integral part of the Project Approach is documentation of children's work. In the belief that instruction, modeling, and opportunities for application will help student teachers develop the knowledge, dispositions, and skills they will need to continue documentation practices, this paper discusses the strategies that have been useful in teaching students in a community college early childhood education program to learn to document. These experiences include learning two theoretical frameworks, classroom observation skills, systematic portfolio collection, and documentation for display. The paper describes the coursework, the program's apprenticeship to an early childhood lab school, and the final public display of documentation. (Author)

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Documentation in a Lab School Setting: Teaching New Teachers to Document

Sallee Beneke

Abstract

The process of documentation helps teachers to inform their teaching. This paper discusses the strategies that have been useful in teaching students in a community college early childhood education program to learn to document. These experiences include learning two theoretical frameworks, classroom observation skills, systematic portfolio collection, and documentation for display.

Over the past five years at Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC), we have worked to create a process and a setting that support the growth of teachers-in-training in the use of documentation. We have attempted to create a process that gradually leads student teachers to a deeper understanding of the value of documentation by giving them progressively more challenging experiences in putting theory into practice. In general, we support this growth by providing theory and examples in an adult classroom setting, opportunities and instruction for documentation of adult projects, opportunities and instruction in documentation of children's learning in an apprentice-type relationship, and public display of student and teacher documentation. We believe that instruction, modeling, and opportunities for application will help student teachers develop the knowledge, dispositions, and skills they will need to continue documentation practices when they leave our program.

Introduction through Coursework

Our lab school, the IVCC Early Childhood Education Center, is part of the Early Childhood Education program at Illinois Valley Community College. Students in the program have their first student teaching experience, Practicum 1, in our center. However, prior to the student teaching experience, the students are required to take a course that we call *Project Approach/Documentation*. This course began as an optional 1-credit evening course and has gradually evolved to its current status as a required 3-credit course. In this course, students study the Project Approach, as popularized by Lilian Katz and Sylvia Chard (2000), and they explore two frameworks for documenting project work as well as methods for organizing and displaying documentation (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). They also learn about the Work Sampling System, a systematic method for assessing young children that includes both a portfolio and a checklist (Meisels et al., 1994).

An effort is made in this course to give students hands-on experience with the practices that relate to the theory that is presented. For example, during the semester, small groups of students develop their own project investigations that stem from a general topic selected by the instructor. Time is made available to the students to perform the investigations

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during class, and an attempt is made to synchronize instruction about the features of the three phases of projects with the project work of the students. As the students' projects get underway, theories and practices of documentation, as presented in *Windows on Learning*, are also explained. Materials, time, and equipment are made available to the students to document the project work completed by their group. The small groups of students work together to prepare a trifold panel that documents their project and opens a "window on a learning experience" and a "window for teacher self-reflection" (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998, p. 25). This type of documentation has its limitations, since the students are documenting their own learning, not that of children. However, it does give them the opportunity to learn to use the materials and technology that can contribute to their ability to document. These materials and equipment are housed in our Parent-Teacher Resource Center, which is adjacent to the adult classroom. The resources that students have access to in this center include two computers, a scanner, color printer, software programs useful for desktop publishing, laminator, bookbinder, digital camera, a small curriculum library, and many art materials. The course instructor is available during office hours, and by appointment, for individual and small-group instruction and assistance.

Through this course, students are able to see examples of project work and documentation that were produced by the children and teachers at our center. These samples send a powerful message that the material we are covering in class has an important place in a real classroom setting. They are able to tour the center and see how the documentation panels are displayed as an important part of the environment. Presenting examples of project work and documentation from other centers also serves to further support their understanding of the usefulness of documentation.

Some firsthand experience with using the Work Sampling System is also a part of this prerequisite course. Students use items from the Work Sampling Checklist (Meisels et al., 1994) to observe children in the Early Childhood Center, and they use the *Omnibus Guidelines* (Jablon, Marsden, Meisels, & Dichtelmiller, 1994), a book of developmental guidelines, to help them interpret their observations. The lab school makes a significant contribution to the training that we are able to offer students in this area of documentation. Many portfolios of individual children's work are available from the center collection. Students explore these and use them to make decisions about curriculum planning in mock exercises, as part of the course.

Apprenticeship in the Lab School

In Practicum 1, students begin to document children's learning on a limited basis within our lab school setting. Members of the teaching staff select an overall project topic to begin the semester, and the students plan lessons and activities that support the development of the project. Each student is required to produce a trifold documentation panel that includes a "window on a child" and a "window on a learning experience" (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). Cameras, film, developing materials, clipboards, Post-its, tape recorders, video camera with LCD panel, and a digital camera are available in the classroom for use by student teachers and teachers. The students follow some simple content and quality guidelines for creating a first documentation panel.

Content guidelines include the following:

- Include a summary of the overall project (for example, a brief project history; major concepts, skills, and dispositions that are evident; names of teachers and student teachers; ages of children; name of school or center).
- Include dated samples of children's work that reveal growth.
- Include photographs that reveal the learning process.
- Use a title to explain the content of each section when using a trifold panel.
- Include a variety of types of documentation (for example, samples of children's comments or conversations that help the viewer understand their thinking).
- Explain the significance of each item included.
- Include artifacts from the project in the display.
- Explain what was learned and how it was learned.
- Reveal the growth in understanding, skills, or dispositions of one or more children.

- Include your reflections regarding your role in the learning experience.

Construction and aesthetic qualities guidelines include the following:

- Trim all items neatly (be sure there are no ragged edges or crooked sides).
- Avoid the "polka-dot effect" produced by the use of many like-sized photographs.
- Arrange items so that the display is pleasing to the eye.
- Attach photos and samples neatly to the panel (tape or adhesive should not show).
- Avoid using rubber cement—it doesn't last over time (double-stick tape works well).
- Use only one color when colored borders are used to mount documentation.
- Use subtle paint or covering as a background on the panel, so it does not distract from the documentation.
- Make sure scanned or copied photos or artwork are not distorted.
- Attach clear plastic bags or sleeves to hold large objects, such as videotapes, that are meant to be removed and viewed.
- Make an effort to include three-dimensional elements in the display.
- Correct all spelling and grammar.
- Use at a minimum a 16-point type font.

While the student teachers are attempting to document the learning of the children within the project, the classroom teachers are available to model the process of documentation and the disposition to document as they collect and prepare documentation on those children not assigned to student teachers. In addition, the instructor of the practicum course is also the director of the center. Her office is on-site at the center, and she is able to observe and advise student teachers on an ongoing basis. Each student teacher has an individual weekly meeting with the practicum instructor in the Resource Center to talk over the student's questions and concerns. Each student teacher has a file on the instructor's computer, and the instructor types brief notes during this meeting and saves them to the student teacher's file. The student teacher and the course instructor each leave every meeting with notes. The notes of these meetings often provide useful documentation of the student teacher's knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Another way that students document children's learning in our lab school is by using the Work Sampling System. Each student assesses one child in seven domains on the checklist. The domains are math, science, language and literacy, the arts, physical development, social studies, and personal social development. The students also collect samples of children's work in five domains for a portfolio, and at the end of the semester, the student prepares a narrative report describing the child's development, including goals for the following semester. The students share this report with the child's parents in a parent-teacher conference at the end of the semester.

Students in Practicum 1 are in attendance at our center for only six hours per week, so their opportunities to document are somewhat limited. One way that we have found to compensate for this limitation is to post a large portfolio collection sheet for each child in the classroom. The sheet is divided into rectangles that represent the domains. As a staff member or student observes or collects a sample that might satisfy a requirement for a child, they write it on a Post-it and place it on the child's sheet. Students and teachers use this sheet to collect anecdotes for each other. For example, if one student leaves a note documenting something a child has accomplished in the social studies domain, the student teacher who is preparing the portfolio on that child can take the Post-it and add it to her collection of documentation when she comes in. Knowing that their brief anecdotal notes must be understood by another teacher encourages the students to build their skills in writing succinct narrative.

Another easy way that we have found to collect documentation for student teachers and teachers is to place collection boxes labeled with each child's name in the classroom. These boxes are conveniently accessible to both the teachers and the children. Both children and teachers often add samples of children's work that they are proud of to these boxes. As in the case of the portfolio collection sheets, these boxes provide a way for the many people who are in and out of our classroom to assist each other in documenting children's learning.

The staff daily journal is another useful means of collecting documentation in the center. This journal is on a clipboard that hangs in the office. Center staff members regularly make entries in this journal, and student teachers are required to spend five minutes at the end of each day in the classroom making an entry. A new, dated page is added each morning, and simple "thought joggers" are written at the top of the page: "What are your thoughts on the progress of the project? What's working? What's not? What went well today? What didn't? Why? Did anything unusual happen?" Teachers and student teachers often revisit these entries as they put together narrative for documentation panels.

Public Display of Documentation

By the end of the semester, we have a panel from each student teacher and often two or more panels from the classroom teachers. We put these panels on display in the hallways of our center for a few weeks, and then we often move them to the lighted display cases in highly traveled hallways of the main campus building at IVCC. Sometimes, as in the case of the Car Project (Beneke, 1998), the children's documentation of their own project is displayed alongside the teacher's.

Since they have traveled these hallways for some time prior to beginning their work at the lab school, the students have often seen similar displays created by prior student teachers and staff. This opportunity to display is their turn to reveal what they have learned about children, learning, and teaching. They often assist in putting the panels up for display and show a great deal of pride in their accomplishment.

In addition, we try to involve students in teacher meetings and inservice meetings where they can display their panels. In the year 2000, our students displayed their work at the state Association for the Education of Young Children conference and at the Illinois Project Group Meeting (Beneke, 2000).

A Journey, Not a Destination

Our efforts and understanding of how to support students in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will help them become effective documenters have grown and changed over the past five years. Many smaller components of this aspect of our teacher training program have grown and evolved, while some earlier components have gone by the wayside. The responses of each new set of student teachers have helped us make many of these decisions. Much in the same way that we advise teachers of young children to use observation and documentation to help them decide what and how to teach, our teaching has been shaped by the observation and documentation of our student teachers as they learn to document. I believe this is a challenging, creative, interesting, and useful way for college instructors to teach, as well as early childhood educators.

In the same way that we encourage the student teachers to use each other and the classroom teachers as resources, we believe we can benefit by sharing our understanding with others who train teachers in the process of documentation. We believe that there is much that we can learn from the experiences of others, and we hope that we have something to contribute.

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